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SUBJECT: CHARGE PARTICIPATES IN TV DEBATE ON OBAMA'S CAIRO SPEECH

1.SUMMARY: As a follow-up to President Obama's speech in Cairo on June 4, a Cotonou-based privately owned TV station, Golfe Television, hosted a live debate on July 2 to address the issues raised in the speech. The three panelists included, the Charge d'Affaires, Roger Gbegnonvi, Professor of Humanities at the University of Abomey-Calavi (and a former Minister of Literacy and National Languages) and El Hadj Bachir Soumanou, Muslim Activist and Director of the Center for Studies and Research on Islam. Soumanou, a former critic of the U.S. policy towards the Muslim community, was very impressed with the President's new direction and approach to Muslims and applauded his foreign policy objectives. Gbegnonvi opined that President Obama's Cairo speech will contribute to easing the tension and pave the way for new perspectives between the United States and the Muslim world. END SUMMARY

Former Tensions between the US and Muslim World Dissipated

¶2. Professor Gbegnonvi felt tensions between the United States and the Muslim world surfaced after September 11. In his view, Obama's speech, interrupted 33 times by applause, went a long way, however, in easing these tensions. Asked to comment on her recollections of events following September 11, the Charge d'Affaires said that her most poignant memories of September 11 revolved around the two weeks she spent at the Embassy in Berlin receiving Germans who wanted to sign the condolence books. Germans of every religion stood in lines deep into the night to sign and express their condolences. She also received a hand drawn postcard from German Muslim children of Turkish origin carrying the phrase "America, we love you". According to her, Islam as a religion had nothing to do with the events of September 11.

Islam and Terrorism

¶3. For Professor Gbegnonvi, the crisis was triggered by the lack of tolerance in the Muslim community. Soumanou countered that, according to the teachings of the Koran, Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance, and any Muslim who does not adhere to these values can no longer be called a Muslim. He said that in every religion, there are good men and bad men. According to the teachings of the Holy Koran, he said, a good Muslim should have respect for his body and, therefore, should not act as a suicide bomber. If we want to end the crisis we are currently going through, he added, we need to abide by the universal values, as indicated in President Obama's speech.

The Middle East Crisis

¶4. Referring to President Obama's speech, the Charge pointed out that the call for a new beginning will be based on mutual respect, stressing that mutual respect implies equal partners. The Charge emphasized the openness with which the President spoke, especially when he recognized the legitimacy of a Palestinian state, which Professor Gbegnonvi said has been accepted by the Israeli Prime Minister, under U.S. pressure. Commenting on the honest and frank tone of Obama's speeches, Soumanou observed that by advocating the creation of a Palestinian state, President Obama went on record as taking a position former President Bush never advocated. He emphasized that President Obama's new approach in dealing with the problem will lead to peace and mutual understanding. Soumanou was

definitely convinced by Obama's speech and relinquished his former reservations over the U.S. foreign policy objectives. In his view, chaos was looming, but the world is fortunate to have a man like Obama whom he described as "a messenger of God."

Nuclear Capability

¶15. "Fear God and speak the truth!" said President Obama in his speech. According to Gbegnonvi, the world cannot continue to live under the threat of a potential nuclear attack, and President Obama's suggestion of a nuclear-free environment is more than welcome. In her comments, the Charge pointed out that the United States is taking the necessary steps to reduce its nuclear arsenal.

Democracy

¶16. President Obama focused on the fact that his administration is committed to promoting democratic values across the world. Gnegnonvi lauded this position and noted that according to recent statistics, 45% of Africans also want democracy. The Charge added that the call for the observance of human rights and democracy should be heard everywhere around the world. Soumanou noted that Democracy and religion can work side by side, and added that Obama is the right man at the right time and place to address this issue.

Freedom of Religion

¶17. Obama's speech highlighted the fact that people in the U.S. are free to practice their religion and the Charge noted that there are over 1,200 mosques in the United States. Soumanou appreciated President Obama's desire to cooperate with Muslims in the United

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States in eradicating poverty, by working with them to enable them to implement the Zakhat, one of the five pillars of Islam.

Promoting Girls' Education

¶18. According to the panelists, it is important to promote girls' education to achieve economic development and they appreciated the fact that President Obama was wise enough to have mentioned this in his speech. The Charge added that girls' education is not only important, but essential for the development of a country.

Comments

¶19. The Charge's comments on the policy of the current administration towards the Muslim community were drawn from State Department materials. She deftly answered sensitive questions and the program sparked many positive comments in the local community and follow-up press reports. The majority of the Beninese audience, including the local Muslim community, has found much to approve in President Obama's speech, thanks to this program. Based on public demand, the program was rebroadcast on July 5.

Boustani